

# From Father To Son

“Ahhhh.”

Stuart leaned forward to balance himself, still not sure of how to react to his bound leg. The hospital bed rails made him semi-confident, but, in the back of his mind, he could see himself tumbling from the bed. Since he was in the middle of relieving himself, he didn't think it would make a pretty picture.

“Ahhhh,” he moaned lowly again. He'd held off using the urinal for as long as possible, hoping Harris would be up early to visit him and help him to the bathroom. After waking, however, he knew he wouldn't be able to wait that long. Stuart found using the container somehow obscene, but his bladder didn't care.

When a man cleared his voice, blue eyes shot to the door. The publisher nearly choked at the site of his priest, black-robed and white-collared, watching him.

“Uh—hi,” Stuart said, unable to stop the flow below. He used a pinkie finger to pull the cover as far up as possible, which concealed about half the bottle and little of him. He didn't want to remove his hands and reveal himself to the man. Not to mention that with his luck, he was sure if he did that, a nasty, wet disaster would occur.

The priest's piercing blue eyes unwaveringly peered into Stuart's. “I'll wait outside,” he said awkwardly.

“I'm just about done, Father,” Stuart said. He pulled the urine bottle from between his legs, repositioned the cover, and hung the half-filled container on the bedrail.

Both men, momentarily transfixed, stared at the urinal, before Stuart averted his gaze and looked at his visitor. It had been a while since the publisher had seen him. Despite the sacred garment, the priest didn't really look like a man of the cloth. His thinning gray hair was cut short, but stylish, and, at about Stuart's age, he was fairly good-looking.

“I'd offer to shake your hand, but it'd probably be best if we passed on that,” Stuart said.

The man gazed his way, a small grin forming on his lips. “Hello, Stuart. I haven't seen you in Mass in a while.”

"You know how it is, Father Greer. The publishing game doesn't take days off," he replied. Stuart realized there was contempt in his voice, but felt unashamed.

Father Greer, obviously uncomfortable, cleared his throat. "I didn't expect to find you in the hospital. Are you all right?"

Stuart waved off his concern and leaned back. "We had an accident at the manor yesterday. Once this leg heals, I'll be as good as new." He put a hand on the aforementioned appendage.

"And your mother?"

The bed-ridden man laughed. "She's healthy as a horse. Don't worry about her."

"I'm glad to hear that. I see Molly frequently. And Harris, Lisa, and the boys occasionally visit the Church of the Sacred Lamb, but I worry about the rest of your family," the priest said.

"Don't. Mother, Edward, and I are perfect." Stuart wondered if lying to a religious man demanded harsher penalty than normal deceit.

The father walked to the bedside and gently touched Stuart's arm. "I'll let you rest, Stuart. But please know that if you would like to make a confession, I'm available to hear it at any time."

"I'll keep that in mind," he answered.

Father Greer nodded graciously and left the room. Stuart watched the door, expecting him to reenter and demand a confession. After their last encounter, he could hardly believe the priest had asked. *When hell freezes over,* Stuart thought, relaxing his weight onto the bed and closing his eyes.



In Hollingsworth Manor's informal dining room, the Hollingsworths ate breakfast silently, each lost in his or her own thoughts of the previous night's events.

Mark was first to break the silence. "It feels weird without Uncle Stuart sitting beside me."

From the opposite side of Stuart's empty chair, Kris said, "It does seem odd without him here."

Molly, delivering a tray of hot cinnamon rolls from the kitchen, said, "Don't ya worry, Mark. It won't be long before Stewy is back at home where he belongs."

"I'll bet he was scared by himself in the hospital last night," Nathan said.

Lisa smiled. "Maybe we should get a welcome-home present for your Uncle Stuart," she suggested.

"Yeah!" Nathan said.

"You can come with me and help pick it out," Lisa told her smiling six-year-old.

"Cool!" said Nathan.

Looking to Kris, Lisa asked, "Would you like to come, Kris?" Lisa casually shifted her gaze to Edward. "Or do you already have plans?"

Kris glanced at Edward, then hurriedly said, "I'd love to go, Lisa. Thanks for asking."

Edward dismissively waved his hand, but said nothing.

Lisa looked across Nathan's head to Harris. "Are you and Mark still going to get Stuart when he's released?"

His mouth full of warm cinnamon roll and cream cheese, Harris merely nodded.

"That sounds like an excellent plan, Lisa!" Molly chirped. "I think I'll bake a cake for Stuart while ye're gone."

"That sounds wonderful, Molly," Lisa smiled. Turning her gaze to Constance, Lisa asked, "What do you think, Mother Hollingsworth? Are you up for a small party?"

"It sounds fine." Constance stood. "I have to go somewhere, but I'll be back later."

Edward's glare followed her from the room.



From the driver's seat of the Mercury Villager minivan, Harris glanced over at Mark. His thirteen-year-old son stared out the window at the passing scenery. Harris supposed now was as good a time as any to have a talk with the boy.

"Mark, I'd like to talk to you about something," Harris blurted.

Mark turned toward his father. "About what?"

"Well," Harris began, unsure of what to say, "I know you're not a little boy, anymore, Mark. I mean—you're becoming a young man, and—"

"*Uncle Stuart told you?*" Mark interrupted.

Harris turned to his son, surprised by Mark's sudden outburst. "Told me what, Mark?"

Mark blushed and looked away. "Nothing. I'm sorry. Forget about it."

Harris took his eyes off the road long enough to glance at Mark, who was staring out the front passenger-side window. "Okay," Harris said. "We've talked a little about puberty and the changes your body will undergo, but I think it's time we talk about sex." Though he couldn't see his son's face, Harris could tell Mark's ears had turned crimson.

"Dad, I already know that stuff."

"What stuff?" Harris asked, his eyes back on the road.

"All that 'insert tab A into slot B' stuff," Mark replied.

Harris grinned. "It had better be 'tab A into slot A,' or someone's going to be very unhappy."

Mark buried his face in his hands. "That sounds like something Uncle Stuart would say."

Harris chuckled, then assumed a serious tone as he asked, "Do you and Stuart talk about stuff like that?"

Mark shook his head. "Not really. We just talk."

"Then where have you heard about sex from?"

"Mainly from school."

Harris glanced at Mark, catching his eyes for just a moment before returning his gaze to the road. "That's the reason I believe we should have this talk, son. I want to be certain you're getting the right information."

"Dad," Mark sighed exasperatedly, "I know what goes where, I know what happens next, and I know to use protection against pregnancy and STDs."

Harris slowly licked his lips. "Mark, I know this is probably embarrassing for you. Truth be told, it's a little embarrassing for me, too. I didn't have a dad to talk to me about this stuff, and I don't really know how to go about it."

The car was silent for a moment, except for the purr of the engine and the hum of the tires across the pavement.

"I never really thought about that," Mark said quietly. "What was it like growing up without a dad?"

Harris turned to find Mark staring intently at him. He smiled briefly before turning his gaze back to the road. "It was tough sometimes. More so for Edward and Stuart than for me, because they were old enough to remember our father and I hadn't even been born when he died.

"Most of what I learned, other than what came from Molly or your grandmother, came from Stuart. He was my male role model. Then, when I was about your age, Stuart went off to college, and the only other male left in the house was your Uncle Edward, and he and I were never close, so I was pretty much left without anyone to talk to."

"So what did you do?" Mark asked.

"I learned about a lot of things, including sex, on my own, and a lot of what I learned was wrong."

Mark was silent.

"Mark, these days, being well-informed about sexual matters can be the difference between life and death. That's why I believe it's important that we discuss this. I love you, and I just want to know that you have enough information to make good decisions when you get ready to have sex."

Mark remained silent.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Mark?"

"Yes. But, Dad, I'm not ready to have sex."

Harris sighed in relief. "Well, that's good, but I still think it's important that you

have correct information."

Mark sighed heavily. "Dad, I know you love me, but this is just too embarrassing to talk about right now. Can't it wait until I'm ready to think about having sex? I promise I'm not going to do something stupid."

Harris glanced at Mark's pleading eyes. "Okay, Mark. I trust you. We'll postpone the discussion for awhile."

"Thanks."

"Sure," Harris smiled. "But, just out of curiosity, do you know the correct anatomical term for 'slot A?'"

"Dad!"



Constance inhaled deeply, then knocked on the hotel room's door.

"Just a minute," came a voice from inside. A moment later, the door opened and Constance was staring inside the room, beyond the security chain, into eyes as green as her own. "Mama?" Dominique Carpenter asked.

"May I come inside?" Constance asked.

Dominique hurriedly closed the door, unfastened the security chain, then reopened the door.

Constance stepped inside and waited for Dominique to close the door. When she heard the click of the latch falling into place, Constance turned to face her daughter. "It's done," Constance said softly.

Tears sprang to Dominique's eyes as she asked, "How did it go?"

"It could have been better, could have been worse."

Wiping away a tear, Dominique nodded slowly. "I—appreciate what you did, Mama."

Constance swallowed hard. "Dominique, I know I probably haven't earned the right, but I would really like to hold you." Her voice broke on the last word.

Dominique took two slow steps forward, then held out her arms. With a choked sob, Constance opened her own arms and stepped into, and returned, her

daughter's embrace.

Constance wept freely as she held her daughter for the first time in forty-eight years, remembering the long-ago heft of her newborn daughter's body. So many years had passed, had been wasted. "There are so many questions I want to ask," Constance said, "so many things I want to know."

"For me, too," Dominique said.

Constance released Dominique and stepped back. Wiping tears from her face, Constance said, "You can ask me anything, anytime."

Dominique wiped her own tears off coffee-and-cream-colored skin. "How could you leave Roseboro without visiting my father's grave?"

Constance was stunned by the question. "I—I knew my father would never tell me where Haywood's body was, and I wasn't sure anyone else would know, either. It was a lot easier for a person to disappear in those days, Dominique, particularly if the person in question was a black man who'd fathered a white woman's child."

Dominique nodded slowly. "Did you ever think of going back?"

Constance shook her head. "No. The only way I could get on with life was to forget about Roseboro and everything that happened there. I couldn't allow myself to consider returning."

An awkward silence fell between them.

Dominique smiled painfully, then said, "I'd like to see Daddy's grave."

"I can understand that," Constance said softly.

"Would you—" Dominique swallowed hard, "Would you go to Roseboro with me?"

Constance stared at her daughter for a long moment. Finally, she said, "Give me some time to get things settled at the office, and to take care of that bitch, Abigayle Nguyen, and I'll go with you."

"Are you serious?" Dominique asked incredulously.

Constance nodded. "I am. I feel like I owe you—and Haywood—that much."

Struggling to hold back another round of tears, Dominique said, "That means a

lot to me.”

“You mean a lot to me,” Constance replied.

Dominique smiled as she wiped away her tears.

Constance turned to survey the hotel room. It was functional, but not very inviting. “I don’t like the idea of you living in a hotel, Dominique.”

Dominique chuckled. “I’m not exactly keen on the idea, but I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Yes, you do,” Constance said. “You can come live with me at Hollingsworth Manor.”

Dominique laughed, then stopped as she saw the look on her mother’s face. “You’re serious?”

Constance nodded.

Bewildered, Dominique shook her head, sending long dreadlocks flailing around her. “How would the rest of your family feel about that?”

“It doesn’t matter how they feel,” Constance replied coldly. “It’s my house, and they’ll do as I say.”

Dominique shook her head. “That’s not the way families work. They all have to agree, or else there’s going to be tension in the house.”

Constance laughed. “Dominique, if the entire family had to agree on everything, we’d never make it through a meal to dessert.”

“Mama, I appreciate the offer, but I can’t live with that kind of constant strife. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to say ‘no.’”

Constance, disappointed, looked down at the beige carpet. Raising her gaze to meet Dominique’s eyes, she said, “I understand, but I hope you’ll reconsider.”

Dominique shook her head. “I don’t think I will.”

Constance smiled. “I never thought I would agree to return to Roseboro, either.”



The Villager traveled much slower than Stuart would have preferred, but with his right leg in the cast from just below the knee to just above his toes, he didn't have much of a choice. He and Tinkerbelle wouldn't be seeing much of each other in the near future.

He leaned toward the driver-side dash, trying to catch a glimpse of the speedometer as Harris settled in at full speed. "Doesn't this thing go any faster?"

Squinted blue eyes momentarily glanced away from the highway. "It's going fast enough. What are you in a hurry for?"

"I'm ready to be in my own bed. I think I've got permanent rail marks on my butt."

Mark laughed from the backseat. "Don't worry. No one will see them."

Stuart reached back as best he could and tried to swat the boy, but Mark easily avoided him. "Thanks, squirt." He shot the boy an evil glare. "But you do realize someone's probably going to have to give me sponge baths."

"Not me!" Mark laughed. "Get Heather to do it."

"Now why didn't I think of that?" Stuart mused. "She might enjoy rubbing my—"

"Stuart," Harris warned, glancing over his shoulder at his son.

"I was going to say 'shoulders after I've spent a long day at the office.'"

Harris quirked an eyebrow in disbelief.

"Sorry. Guess I'm feeling a little giddy to be out of that hospital. I hate being cooped up and babied like that," Stuart responded.

Silence settled over the cabin for several minutes, the air thick with thoughts and questions no one wanted to voice. Stuart hadn't had the power to ask about the situation at home yet, though Constance's revelation had rarely left his mind in the last day.

"How is Mother?" the older brother finally asked.

Harris took a deep breath, his eyes fixed on the road. "She's fine. Quiet, as usual."

"What's the general consensus about the proclamation she made before the sky fell down?"

The younger man glanced in the rearview mirror to see Mark scooting an inch closer, listening intently. "No one's really talking about it. Mother didn't seem very open about it, really."

"I'll bet Edward's been a maniac."

"You know our big brother. He's a model citizen." They smiled grimly at each other. "Steam's still coming out of his ears," Harris added.

Stuart laughed. "I can't wait to see that. Lord knows we didn't need this, but I love seeing Edward's panties in a bunch."

Mark giggled in the back seat, and Harris became serious. "Maybe we should all just let this lie. There's nothing to be gained from making a mess of it."

Smoothing back his hair with one hand, Stuart stared at the flashing white line, deep in thought. "I—I don't know. I think, deep down, I knew all along. The day Dominique came to the door, there was something so familiar about her." He shook his head as if to clear it. "I couldn't shake it. Since then, I've been trying not to think about it."

"Yeah," Harris quietly agreed.

"And I don't want to think about it now, either."

The soft roar of the tires on the road filled the van as all three occupants drifted into their own thoughts. Stuart smoothed his hair again and wondered what it would be like to have a sister. From what he knew of Dominique Carpenter, she wasn't the friendliest person in the world. That certainly didn't mean she was unworthy of a second chance.

Stuart groaned as an eighteen-wheeler passed, jostling the much smaller automobile and jarring his immobile leg. "I need my drugs."

"Did they give you something to take at home?" Mark asked from behind him.

"Yeah. I think it's just souped-up Tylenol, though. I only got the good stuff when I was an inpatient," Stuart said, repositioning his leg.

Mark poked his head in between the front passengers. "What did it feel like to be on the painkillers?"

Stuart raised an eyebrow, but decided it best to be honest with the curious boy. "Well, I was in pain, so they gave me the medicine. It helped some with easing the pain, but I think it just mostly made me go to sleep."

"It didn't get you high?"

Harris questioningly raised an eyebrow at Stuart, who returned his brother's look. It was difficult to know how much information was *too* much, especially when you were talking with someone else's kid. "It made me lightheaded, Mark, but it wasn't a very pleasant experience. I felt like I didn't have any control over my body. I could have puked at any moment, and probably wouldn't have known it."

The teenager shook his head. "That doesn't sound very cool."

"Drugs usually aren't cool. The ones who want you to think that are the dealers. Listen to old Nancy Reagan. Just say 'no.'" Stuart ruffled Mark's hair.

Mark frowned at him. "Who's Nancy Reagan?"

Stuart rubbed his eyes, then looked at his brother. "What kind of child are you raising?" he asked.

"A good one," Harris smiled. "You're just getting old."

"Thanks," Stuart chuckled. "I feel it. I can't wait to get home, in my own bed, with no busybody nurses bugging me or doctors prodding me every ten minutes. I could surely use some peace and quiet."

Looking to his brother, then to Mark, Stuart could see their blue eyes twinkling mischievously. "Why are you two grinning like wild hyenas?"

"No reason," they said simultaneously.

Stuart eyed them warily, until realization struck him. "Oh, God." He ran both hands through his dark hair. "Don't tell me they're doing some sort of freaking party. I'm an injured man, here." He pointed to the cast.

Harris began slowing the car to turn into the drive. "Okay, we won't tell you then."

"Did you two have something to do with this?" he asked, outraged.

Neither father nor son answered. Stuart pursed his lips in frustration. "This isn't really what I need right now, guys. I don't know if I can take it after yesterday."

"You can do it, Uncle Stuart," Mark encouraged, placing a hand on Stuart's shoulder.

Harris pulled the van into the garage and turned off the ignition. The three men remained seated, silently staring ahead.

"Forget what I said about Nancy Reagan, Mark. Do you know where I can get some locoweed? Maybe it won't be as bad if I fit in with the rest of you nuts."

As Mark gave in to his giggles, the cabin erupted in laughter.